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Life Sciences agreements signed with Ghana, South Africa

Africa Access 2001 Conference facilitates development for Missouri businesses, organizations

ST. LOUIS, Mo. Delegates from Ghana and South Africa formalized agreements today to pursue joint ventures in the life sciences and information technology.

The agreements were the result of the Africa Access 2001 conference, an annual event hosted by the Department of Economic Development's Office of International Marketing. More than a dozen delegates from Ghana and South Africa met with approximately 100 representatives of Missouri businesses and universities and officials from the State of Missouri and the United States Department of Commerce. Prior to the conference, delegates spent nearly a week traveling the state to visit businesses, universities and private research facilities.

As a result of discussions during the conference, Washington University Medical School-BJC HealthCare Systems and the University of Ghana Medical School signed an agreement to build a virology research laboratory at the University of Ghana Medical School. The lab will conduct testing and research into the HIV/AIDS virus. Physicians and technicians staffing the lab will also work to develop standardized testing for the disease, which is currently not available in Western Africa. Both the University of Ghana and Washington University will supply staff for the research lab. Scientists from both schools will have the opportunity to travel to each other's country for HIV/AIDS research.

In addition, the two agreed to jointly conduct a social study into the cultural attitudes surrounding HIV/AIDS in Ghana. The results of this study will be used to develop a public education program aimed at both slowing the transmission of the disease and encouraging early treatment.

"The potential impact of this work is enormous," said Dr. Clifford Nii Boi Tagoe, dean of the University of Ghana Medical School. "There is a lack of understanding of this disease in the African population. This lab will provide a tremendous opportunity to study the disease in our own country and develop programs to stop its spread."

While plans are already under way for the building of the lab, both Washington University Medical School-BJC HealthCare Systems and the University of Ghana Medical School cautioned that the project cannot succeed without adequate corporate sponsorship.

"We are working in both the United States and Ghana to find corporate sponsors," said Dr. Dan Mueller, director of International Healthcare Services for the Washington University School of Medicine. "If we have adequate funding, this will be a five-year project. Long-term, we are talking about developing clinical regimes for the treatment of HIV/AIDS that are currently nonexistent in Ghana."

Another result of the conference was a preliminary joint agreement between the Donald Danforth Plant Sciences Center, Africa BIO and the State of Missouri Office of International Marketing to collaborate on research and development, the exchange of information and technology, and the development of biotechnology businesses.

"The network we will establish will make people in the United States aware of the key needs of Africa," said Dr. Jocelyn Webster, Director of Africa Bio. Africa BIO is a biotechnology association that promotes the safe and responsible use of biotechnology to enhance food and agriculture.

"This agreement will improve the flow of scientific information in our world and facilitate biotechnology research and business development," said Dr. Claude Faquet, Director of ILTAB for the Donald Danforth Plant Sciences Center.

The Africa Access 2001 conference focused on biotechnology applications in health care and agriculture, as well as the commercial transfer of technologies to support economic growth policies and initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa. The discussions and partnerships begun at the conference will continue in September when the Department of Economic Development will lead a trade mission to Ghana and South Africa. Last year's trade mission resulted in an estimated \$5 million to \$7 million in sales for two Missouri companies and more than 300 business leads.

"The two agreements that were reached at this conference are evidence of the growing partnership between Missouri and Africa," said Angela Kinworthy, director of the Department of Economic Development's Office of International Marketing. "Each trade mission, and each conference results in new business deals and new agreements, all of which benefit Missouri businesses and strengthen efforts to provide sustainable human development in Ghana and South Africa."

Over the past few years, the state has worked hard to develop African markets so that Missouri businesses can enter this relatively untapped marketplace. In 1998, Missouri became the first state in the United States to lead a trade mission to Ghana, Africa. A year later, the state opened a representative office in Accra, Ghana, becoming the first state with a full-time office in West Africa. Missouri is also the only state with membership in the Corporate Council on Africa.

For more information on the Department of Economic Development's international development efforts, please call 1-888-690-4855 or visit online at www.ecodev.state.mo.us/internmark.